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# AN ACTOR BORN TO THE PURPLE

MY YEARS ON THE STAGE. By John Drew. E. P. Dutton & Co.

A Review By OTIS SKINNER.

FOR me the perusal of John Drew's "My Years on the Stage" is like lifting the curtain on my own past. For many vital episodes of the narrative were the joint experiences of biographer and reviewer. This is especially true of the Daly's Theater engagement, five years of which were spent in hardworking professional companionship under the most insistent martinet and disciplinarian it has been my fortune ever to have met. Augustin Daly was an idealist in his work. His ever present dream was the perfection of his performances, and Drew and I were units in Daly's scheme of a perfect whole. Drew loomed larger in this scheme of things than I did; he was receiving his reward for many years of faithful service under the Daly direction, but we both were members of a force whose artistic fighting value was unquestioned.

It is the memory of this association that must necessarily impair any impartial judgment of mine upon "My Years on the Stage," for I confess the bias of strong friendship and admiration for its author, and the delight I have in following through the pages is extreme. Nor can I conceive any reader of the frank and entertaining narrative as not sharing my pleasure.

If ever an actor was born to the purple it was John Drew. The heritage of father, mother and grandmother was in his blood, and as the memoirs tell us, he was god-fathered by William Wheatley and William E. Sheridan and godmothered by Mrs. D. P. Bowers—all aristocrats of the stage when John made his appearance in 1853. He cut his teeth on the silver spoon of the theater.

His mother's influence must have been potent from John's earliest years; an influence that urged him always in the paths of correctness and good taste. Mrs. John Drew stood for good breeding and manner. The tradition of old comedy was at her finger tips; no one knew more of the stage business of the plays of Sheridan, Coleman, Farquhar and the dramatists of the snuff, ruffe, powder patch, teacup and epigram comedy than she, and her annual production of these plays at the Arch Street Theater was the delight of generations of Philadelphia theatergoers. To be under her direction was to go to school, and her scholars found her a stern taskmaster. Her familiar title of "The Duchess" may perhaps describe the awe in which she was held.

It so happens that I was a week's pupil of hers at the time of the episode which Drew describes of his being compelled to play the part of Mr. Bronzley in "Wives as They Were and Maids as They Are" at short notice. John's execution of that herculean feat was too absorbing for him to have been altogether conscious of what brought it about. It was a week given to the annual appearance of Mrs. Drew at her theater in revivals of six old comedies. As it was, at the end of the regular season a company of Philadelphia favorites was easily gotten together, and rehearsals began for the grueling week. My own brain nearly gave way in the attempt to memorize six parts, and I was cast out for secondary characters at that.

Think of the task of the leading man. He was John Clinton Hall, a generally dependable actor, held in local favor. Charles Surface in the "School for Scandal" proved of no great difficulty to him for the opening night, but the next morning, when "Wives as They Were" was called for rehearsal, he floundered through the lines of Mr. Bronzley quite hopelessly. At the end of the first

act he went out at the stage door and never came back, and the play was to have been produced that night! The week's program was changed. "The School for Scandal" was repeated on Tuesday and Wednesday matinee with a local amateur, who was already up in the lines of Charles; George Hoey of the Chestnut Street Theater company had two days in which to study and play the part of Mr. Oakley in "The Jealous Wife," on Wednesday night, and toward daybreak on Thursday morning John (summoned by telegram) arrived at the home of his mother, who gave him a kiss of welcome and a play book at the same moment, and said: "You play this part to-night."

I never witnessed a greater feat of memory in the theatre. The part of Bronzley is one of the longest in the drama and, when one considers the stiffness, crankiness and general cussedness of its phraseology, the task of mental digestion and execution in the space of a dozen hours or so becomes appalling. Yet John went through the scenes with an ease and certainty that hardly could have been greater had he had a week's study of the part.

## II.

Thus very early John Drew became acquainted with success. He never knew the bitterness and hardships of the theater. The nearest he ever came to such an un-welcome experience seems to have been in the year of the unfortunate "Diplomacy" tour, a season marked by the tragedy of the murder of the company manager, Ben Porter, by the brute deputy sheriff, Curry, at Marshall, Tex. At its end he had no money, but, as he said, he could go home to mother.

Fortune followed him through his years at Daly's two theaters and went unquestionably by his side when he slipped into stardom under Charles Frohman's management. Drew frankly acknowledges his debt to Daly. I heard his first night curtain speech as a star at Palmer's Theater and rejoiced that he voiced therein his gratitude to that commander under whose banner he had fought so long. No one ever came under Daly's direction for any length of time without departing with a fuller knowledge of his own art. Daly was by no means a superman in his judgments of acting or of direction, indeed he was often

wrong headed and stubborn, but he was insistent, he was dynamic, he was indefatigable, he was, above all, the very incarnation of discipline. We occasionally rebelled against the reading of a line or a piece of stage business that he would give us, but it was Daly's conception and his way it had to be, no matter what we thought.

But he did hammer at our faults and he did bring our best accomplishment and most effective means of expression into play. Daly never could have given Drew his ease, his *savoir faire*, his sangfroid method of speech in certain delightful lines of his repertory, his ability to wear clothes perfectly and to be always the gentleman and to the manor born; he never could have created these qualities, but he could make their possessor aware of them, bring them out, polish and point them. Daly had a keen instinct for characteristics and traits in the members of his company. As he made his own adaptations from French and German sources he found frequent occasion to change original characters around to fit the personalities of his players. This was one of the secrets of the effective team work of the Daly company, each member was encouraged to play himself to a large extent. It might have been interesting had Mr. Drew chosen to give more of his personal estimate of Augustin Daly as a man, as a character and as a manager. One gets his estimate, however, as well as the author's opinion about other interesting people, rather by inference than in precise phrase.

We are made to feel by this method of inference that when Daly and Drew parted all was not kindness and good will between them. This was but the natural result of a clash of temperaments at a critical moment. Drew felt that with the offer of stardom and financial increase placed unsought in his lap, the moment had come when he should take advantage of the tide in his affairs, and Daly felt that Drew had been pushed to eminence by his especial fostering and stage direction and that he should stay forever under his management. It was natural that a man of Daly's temperament should have held the view he did in this case. His view of everything not to his own interests was very narrow. His people should by all ethics be irrevocably his, their devotion to his interests alone. Drew's defection was nothing short

of complete ingratitude in his eyes. Drew could not have acted otherwise than he did. Every motive of self-interest pointed to his course.

Daly's fortunes were declining. The whole complexion of the theater was changing. The stock company, with its corps of favorites appearing and reappearing season after season in a list of plays which, however attractive, bore a strong family resemblance to one another, was losing favor. Special companies, featured players, elaborate productions and the new blood of authorship were in demand. On the ground to meet this demand was a resourceful, far-seeing, imaginative little man, Charles Frohman. He saw in John Drew a popular favorite in New York and realized that he could place him in a setting that would make his name a trade mark wherever comedy had an appeal and theaters had a draught. The supporting companies should be the best procurable—the productions beyond reproach—the plays selected from whatever source brought the most deserved vehicle, and the attraction should always be JOHN DREW. Here then opportunity cried aloud. It was inevitable. Thus success continued to guide the Drew fortunes through the years of Frohman management.

The memoirs amble along in an impressionistic way—hitting the high places. One always feels the author's keen interest in the people and conditions about him and his easy humorous view of the theater and its associations. In the earlier chapters he is especially humorous in his view of himself. He spends no time in the analysis of his art, of the characters he played or of the plays in which he appeared. Had he done so the result would have been much more voluminous than the pleasant narrative of 233 pages. To the theatergoers of the Daly days and the later Frohman regime the volume will bring recollections of plays and players popular in their day. It brings back to me an echo of buoyant spirits and keen sense of humor of Ada Rehan, the dry chuckle and the cantankerous "Heh!" of James Lewis, the assumed dignity of Mrs. Gilbert, which covered the sweetest nature in the world, the old school majesty of Charles Fisher, the odd theatricalism of Charles Le Clerq, the beauty and grace of Virginia Dreher and the mischief and jollity of May Irwin.

## III.

He speaks briefly of the London engagements of the Daly company. The first was in 1884, when a little band of us appeared under the joint management of William Terris and Augustin Daly at a decrepit and foul box of a theater, Toole's in Chandos street. We were all frightened and quaking over our appearance before a London public. We had heard stories of the rowdiness of the pit and felt that we were in for a massacre.

No great calamity befell us, however. The comedy of "7-20-8," which had been a favorite in America, was received with toleration, a seven weeks' engagement, with the repertory extended, was played to a discriminating few of the London public and Daly left a reputation behind that led to a success in 1886, with "A Night Off" at the Strand Theater, and the never to be forgotten revival of "The Taming of the Shrew" at the Gaiety Theater in 1888.

Flashes of noted men and women appear through the pages of the book like figures on a moving picture screen: Forrest, Booth, Wallack, Generals Grant and Sherman, Wendell Phillips and Charles Dickens, Brigham Young, Adelaide Nielson, Fanny Davenport, Maurice Barrymore, Joseph Jefferson, William Warren and, in the London chapters, Irving, Terry, Bancroft,

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